DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 938 PS 029 700

TITLE	Child Care Social Climate. NCEDL Spotlights, No. 14.
INSTITUTION	National Center for Early Development & Learning, Chapel Hill, NC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1999-09-00
NOTE	3p.; Excerpted from "Social-Emotional Classroom Climate in Child Care, Child-Teacher Relationships and Children's Second-Grade Peer Relations" by Carollee Howes.
CONTRACT	R307A60004
AVAILABLE FROM	Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, CB #8185, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8185. Tel: 919-966-0867; Web site: http://www.ncedl.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Attachment Behavior; *Caregiver Child Relationship; *Day Care; Day Care Centers; Early Childhood Education; Followup Studies; Longitudinal Studies; *Peer Relationship; Predictor Variables; *Social Development; Teacher Student Relationship; *Young Children

ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study, a 5-year, ongoing longitudinal study examining the effects of child care in 4 states. The report focuses on the emergence of the quality of children's early relationships with their teachers in childcare as an important predictor of their social relations with peers as they become older. Relevant findings from the study indicate that children who rated high in peer aggression, disruption, and social withdrawal were rated high in child-teacher relationship conflict and low in child-teacher relationship closeness. Children who rated high in prosocial behavior with peers were also were rated high in child-teacher relationship closeness and low in child-teacher relationship conflict. Classrooms with higher levels of behavior problems had lower levels of child-teacher closeness. The report lists predictive factors for children's second-grade social competence with peers, aggression ratings, disruption ratings, prosocial ratings, and ratings of social withdrawal. The attachment theory underpinning the perspective on teacher-child relationships is also explained. The report considers implications of these findings for child care teachers and elementary school teachers. (KB)

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ED 455 938

NCEDL
Spotlights

No. 14 September 1999

Child Care Social Climate

Following are excerpts from "Social-emotional classroom climate in child care, child-teacher relationships and children's second-grade peer relations" by Carollee Howes, UCLA. Data for this paper was gathered in the Cost Quality and Outcomes Study, a five-year on-going longitudinal study examining the effects of child care in 4 states

Child-teacher relationship in child care predicts later social relations

The quality of children's early relationships with their teachers in child care is emerging as an important predictor of children's social relations with peers as older children. In this study, we explore the relative contributions of early classroom social/emotional climate and individual relationships and behaviors to social competence with peers five years later.

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Predictive factors

Children's second-grade social competence with peers ratings could be predicted by
- preschool classroom social-emotional climate,
- 4-year-old behavior problems and child-teacher relationship quality and
- contemporary child-teacher relationship quality.

Aggression ratings were best predicted by
- a preschool classroom high in behavior problems and low in child-teacher closeness,
- by the child's poor child-teacher closeness as a 4-year-old and
- by contemporary child-teacher relationship conflict.

Disruption ratings could best be predicted by
- being a boy,
- preschool classroom climates high in behavior problems and low in child-teacher closeness as a 4-year-old and
- by high levels of child-teacher conflict as a second grader.

Prosocial ratings could best be predicted by
- being a girl,
- preschool classroom climates high in time spent interacting with peers,
- the child's low levels of behavior problems as a 4-year-old and
- high levels of child-teacher closeness and low levels of child-teacher conflict as a second grader.

Ratings of social withdrawal could best be predicted by
- a classroom climate high on behavior problems,
- low levels of individual behavior problems as a 4-year-old and
- low levels of child-teacher closeness as a second grader.

Results

- Children rated high in peer aggression, disruption, and social withdrawal were rated high in child-teacher relationship conflict and low in child-teacher relationship closeness.
- Children rated high in prosocial behavior with peers also were rated high in child-teacher relationship closeness and low in child-teacher relationship conflict.

Classrooms with higher levels of behavior problems had lowers levels of child-teacher closeness.

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Underpinning our thinking

Our perspective on teacher-child relationships is drawn from attachment theory, which assumes that children use their relationships with significant adults to organize their experiences.

If children feel emotionally secure with the teacher they can use her as a secure base and a resource for exploring the learning opportunities of the classroom.

Each child-teacher relationship is built independently of the child's prior adult-child relationships (including child-mother) and of the other child-teacher relationships in the classroom.

Current research suggests that children with close child-teacher relationships are also socially competent with peers. Children perceived by teachers as difficult 4-year-olds tend to build child-teacher relationships high in conflict. These persist so that by kindergarten, children who were problematic 4-year-olds tend to be less able than children with other relationship histories to use the child-teacher relationships to master the academic content of school.

Our outcome measure, second-grade social competence with peers, is significant because by mid-elementary school, individual differences in children's social competence with peers appears to stabilize and predict future adaptive or non-adaptive behavior in adolescence.

Aggression and social withdrawal are maladaptive behaviors, indicating the absence of social competence.

Discussion

These findings suggest that considerable individual variation in children's social competence with peers as second graders can be understood by examining both their individual experiences as 4-year-olds in child care and the social emotional climate of their child care classroom.

These findings support the premise that individual relationships are constructed within particular contexts and that both the contributions of the individual children and their teachers and of the climate of the context are important predictors.

The particular pathway in which preschool social and emotional climates and individual behavior interact are consistent with theoretical predictions and with growing literature that suggests that contemporary and earlier positive child-teacher relationships are linked to social competence with peers. Aggression and disruption as a second-grader was best predicted by being a 4-year-old boy whose teacher both perceived to have behavior problems and to have constructed a conflictual child-teacher relationship and who was enrolled in a classroom characterized by conflictual social interactions and relationship. This description is similar to descriptions of coercive, unpleasant family climates in which the provocative behaviors of all members of the group tend to escalate conflict.

In contrast, children who as second-graders appear to have withdrawn from peers are best predicted by being a child with low levels of behavior problems as a 4-year-old who was enrolled in a preschool with a conflictual social emotion climate. This description is similar to children who are observed to avoid social contact with peers and adults in child care.

While problem behavior and teacher-child relationship preschool climate measures predicted second-grade aggression, disruptions, and social withdrawal, the peer social/emotional climate predicted prosocial behavior. These findings are consistent with other studies which suggest that social competence with peers (as opposed to maladaptive behaviors with peers) appears to be best predicted by early opportunities to engage with peers.

Implications

These findings suggest that both child care teachers and elementary teachers may benefit from an increased awareness of the importance of the social and emotional climate of the classroom.

We suggest that teacher preparation programs may need to focus on this aspect of curriculum for young children as well as more traditional material.

If you want to know more

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NCEDL is administratively housed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to UNC-CH partners in NCEDL are the University of Virginia and the University of California at LosAngeles. This project is supported under the Education Research and Development Centers Program, PR/award number R307A60004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education (**www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/ECI/**), the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the U.S. Department of Education, or any other sponsoring organization. Permission is granted to reprint this *Spotlight*; we ask that you acknowledge the author of the paper on which this *Spotlight* is based and the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

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